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Cosmic Canvas and Human Creativity

Towards an Artist's Paradigm for Human Living in and after the Pandemic

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The gift of creativity marks out Homo Sapiens from the rest of creatures. All human civilizations collectively, from the time of agricultural revolution some 12,000 - 15,000 years ago to the present is the product of human creativity. Ancient arts like pottery, weaving, brick making and cave-painting spanning some 25,000 years are still with us in highly sophisticated ways as expressions of our fertile creative impulse. The ancient Greek word for art is *techné*, and the word technology that we now differentiate from art is essentially the result of artistic imagination and human capability for invention, innovation and design making. It seems *Homo Faber*, literally "Man the Maker", is the proud title modern humans have adopted for themselves. Every maker is certainly an artist, and every tool is a work of art.

In this brief paper, we use the words art and civilization in a comprehensive and inter-connected manner to refer to all forms of expressing human imagination and intelligence. Civilization is obviously a human construction, and human artistic impulse is the prime mover behind all civilizational super structure.

The Cosmic Canvas

The word *cosmic* is used here mainly with two levels of meaning in mind.

First, cosmos, literally translated as *world* from original Greek, means order. It is the arrangement and pattern of an organized whole. In this

sense, the universe is cosmos or an orderly whole. The implication of decoration and beauty as in the adjective *cosmetic* comes from this orderly arrangement. What is orderly is beautiful. The opposite of cosmos in this sense is *chaos*, the state of disorder. For people with religious conviction, the orderly whole of the cosmos is the creation of God, the ultimately transcendent Source of the universe.

Secondly, art in its broad meaning is imitating or rather participating in this cosmic creativity that continually constructs, configures and coordinates out of the disorder of chaos. The biblical creation myth for example, speaks of the creative Spirit of God brooding over the waters which is the symbol of formlessness, in order to create everything that has form and meaning. In this view, created reality always depends on the creative will of its ultimate creator for its very existence. If that will is withdrawn, the orderly creation falls back to the condition of nothingness and dissolves into chaos. In physics, we know that the Second Law of Thermodynamics speaks of *entropy* which is the state of a system having lost all energy and hence complete disorder. In a finite closed system entropy tends to a maximum as the second law says. In a religious, metaphysical sense, the creative artist imitating the fundamental creative act of God the Creator organizes new energy clusters out of the nothingness of chaos.

In India, we speak of the cycle of great ages like Krita yuga, Treta yuga, Dwapara yuga and Kali yuga. These are mythical ages of unimaginably long duration. But at the end of this Yugas, the *Pralaya* or the ultimate dissolution of all happens, and the creation restarts from the beginning. This is a cyclic view of the cosmic process of creation (*srishti*), preservation (*stiti*), and dissolution (*samhaara*), and then again back to creation in order to continue the cycle. But, within the limited period of human existence, we are instructed again and again to perform our duty (*dharma*) of practising the true, the good and the beautiful in order to realize the meaning of our existence.

It is within this ethical, philosophical and spiritual frame that the artist is called upon to create. The artist, therefore, continually creates meaning, and without art and artistic creativity in their broad sense we lose all meaning of existence. The loss of meaning in human life is tantamount to dissolution or entropy in the physical universe. In the case of individual artists, a cave-wall or a piece of paper or a lump of clay or a block of stone can be the canvas to express their creativity. Stretched to universal dimensions, the whole cosmos becomes the canvas for human beings as artists par excellence.

The canvas of any dimension or any stuff thus symbolically represents our universe, at least the "observable universe" as some physicists would modestly put it, since we know only some 5% of the visible universe, even that scantily, while 95% is dark energy and dark matter of which we have no idea at present.

Of course, when we say the canvas represents the universe, we are using the language of myth, metaphor and ritual. In religion, it is the altar space or the temple sanctuary that represents the universe. Repeating rituals and festivals daily, monthly or annually, is the act of recreating the universe. As cultural anthropologists like Mircea Eliade, the Romanian-American scholar who studied philosophy in India for many years, might agree that the artists also recreate the universe every time they paint, sculpt, sing, perform or build. The cosmic canvas is the widest possible frame for every artist, and it is within this frame that they practice 'art and life' or rather the 'art of life'.

The Anthropocene and the Artist

With all the questions and threats raised by the global nature of the pandemic, humanity is forced to review some of the concepts like progress, development and globalization that have assumed fundamental importance in contemporary human life. Probably with tongue in cheeks, let me say that it is now that the world has truly become global because the pandemic has penetrated every nook and corner of the world irrespective of race, gender, rank, wealth or nationality. It seems to be

the first experience of humanity to have a really global pandemic. Our much-vaunted globalization in economic and cultural domains during the last three or four decades has created systems of injustice that exploited the weaker sections of the global population. The unjust hierarchy generated by that globalization has become a brutal oppression to large sections of poor people. All criticism of prevailing globalization had been muted by the powers to be.

But now, the Corona pandemic has exploded the myth of the false globalization by forcefully isolating people between and within nations. The grounding of thousands of aircrafts all over the world and stopping of all other transportation is a glaring example of reducing our global *one world* into compartments and ghettos in order to ward off the spread of the disease.

The Anthropocene as the latest geological age is a subject of continuing debate. It is the age, according to its advocates, when human activity ever since the beginning of civilization has made a huge impact on earth and its environment leading to some of the crises like global warming and climate change. Some researchers would trace it back to the agricultural revolution some 12,000-15,000 years ago. Some others would begin with the industrial revolution in the 18th century. Some would put it to the turn of history as recent as the nuclear age.

The impact of the Anthropocene on our biosphere and various ecosystems has been calculated quantitatively by some. For example, it has been reckoned that the anthropogenic mass, that is, all material human output like buildings, vehicles, machines etc. is found to be weighing more than the biomass, that is, all trees, forests, and animals on earth. This is certainly a state of imbalance, where human material creation outweighs the natural life forms on earth. We, however, do not yet know the far-reaching ecological consequences of the Anthropocene.

Ethics of Creativity

There is a very serious ethical question that we need to face here. If human creativity in the Anthropocene has become the source of fatal environmental impact on earth, then artists have to bear a certain degree of responsibility in that sort of development. At least they have to assume some responsibility for guiding humanity by way of pointing to the right direction that all should follow for a sustainable future. Of course, here we take art in its broadest meaning spanning from architecture to satellite technology, from archery to nuclear missile technology. It doesn't mean that each individual artist is guilty of the negative and destructive consequence of misdirected human creativity. But we assume a collective responsibility for the common good of a sane human future.

In our digital age, we are confronted with the challenge of perceiving anew and redefining what we call Reality. Western philosophers in general refer to Reality as the sum total of all that exists. Of course, this is an ontological understanding of '*What Is*'. Artists like Pablo Picasso would say that 'Everything you can imagine is real'. However, common people refer to Reality as whatever they experience in their day-to-day life and what they see around as their physical environment. This commoner's view is a down to earth understanding of Reality. In business circles, for example, we need 'reality checks' from time to time to make sure that we are not deviating from the practical and the profitable in whatever we plan and do.

In the digital age, we have gone beyond this ordinary understanding of Reality to new levels like Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality. It is obvious that most of us, particularly during the present pandemic lockdown, in schooling and in office work, in academia and administration, live in the virtual world most of the time. The further we go up to higher levels of Augmented and Mixed Realities, we are again shifting our ground from what we were used to call Real. This may be a bit alarming and confusing for ordinary folks who may not fully accept

the consequences of losing their familiar down to earth reality. Philosophers are now bound to reexamine their conventional discourses on Reality.

However uncomfortable it may seem to some people, the digital culture and the fourth industrial revolution have come to stay and have started to demand that we dismantle some of our conventional notions of Reality and open up to the virtual universe. This again is a rather new domain of human creativity, and many highly imaginative and resourceful artists are actively involved in this process of enhancing and augmenting and mixing up our Realities.

Some Examples

From a modest artistic perspective, I shall try to illustrate how a humble artist envisions the future and its ethical- spiritual dimensions.

1. The Snail O'Clock

The work of art titled *The Snail O'Clock* represents a cosmic scenario. A huge snail is slowly moving to the cosmic future. Of course, a slug is sluggish! The dark brown shell of the snail is portrayed as the dial of a clock with two needles. The hours marked on the outer ring of the dial appear to be in Roman digits. The number on top should normally read XII. But in the painting, you cannot read that. One of the needles breaks out of the frame of the clock and reaches out in the form of a yellow leaf of the holy Ficus Tree (Bodhi tree) to the sun and the moon, the day and the night, and to the infinite expanse. The other needle goes in circles and contortions and finally assumes the shape of the symbol of Infinity (∞). Instead of pointing to the hours marked on the clock's dial the needles defy the logic of our time-reckoning and transforms itself into the symbol of infinity. Below, the snail is moving on a wheel with about 24 spokes. This reminds us of the Wheel of Dharma (*Dharma Chakra*), the ethical-spiritual summary from the Buddhist tradition. The slow movement is regulated by the great principles of the Dharma taught by

great teachers of humanity including Lao-tse, Confucius, Socrates, The Buddha, The Christ, The Prophet and so on.



Figure 1 : The Snail O'Clock, Acrylic on Canvas, 90cm x 60 cm

There is now a movement for slowing down which is advocating the reduction to human scale of excessive speed now in vogue in science, technology, transportation, communication and administration. The followers of this movement believe that speed kills. As all of us know, our quest for speedier and speedier ways of life destroys our environment, inflicts damage on human brain and puts human psyche to unbearable stress, distorts our interpersonal relationships and eliminate many avenues of leisurely experiencing truth, beauty and goodness. So, it is on the artist also to discern the signs of future in a responsible manner and prepare the way for a new humanity that can live on earth in harmony, love and compassion with all the rest of creation.

2. The Fish-Body

Let me take another example by showing you a painting with the title 'The Fish-Body'.



Figure 2 : 'The Fish-Body', Acrylic on Canvas, 120 cm x 80 cm

From a distance, you see a large fish rising from the ocean depth and reaching up to a source of light and air. But if you zoom in, it is a large school of fish, tens of hundreds in number, all streaming into the shape of one single fish. There is anxiety in their eyes. They seem to be gasping for breath (like thousands of COVID patients today gasping for oxygen!) and are driven by a profound quest for light and air. Of course, this is a symbolic representation of the unity of the human race – the one body of humanity, constituted by millions and millions of individual human beings. Each individual feels secure when it is tightly closer to the body of others, so that they all together constitute one and the same body. As one body they feel together, move together, search together in total solidarity among themselves. This painting is executed during the

time of COVID lockdown in India, when people felt very insecure and were afraid of impending death. The only way to change the situation is to be in one body with all others. As we said earlier about globalization, in face of the threat of death and annihilation of the human race all humans irrespective of their nationality, wealth, profession or skin color are to rise together as one body to reach life-giving light and oxygen. This again is an artist's perception of the ethical and spiritual orientation that is urgently needed in our collective human psyche.

3. Purusha and Prakriti

A third picture titled 'Purusha and Prakriti' shows an imaginary farmer couple from Punjab, a man and woman of Sikh religious tradition. But symbolically, they are Purusha and Prakriti from an ancient Indian philosophical tradition, representing the universal Male principle (Purusha or Person) and the Feminine principle (Prakriti or Nature). Purusha is in a way the abstract Universal Spirit. Prakriti is the Earth or the whole material creation. The union of Spirit and Matter together is the vital source of all life on earth. The beard of the man (Purusha) is symbolically extended to form a granary of seeds. The shawl of the woman (Prakriti) is stretched and transformed into the form of a uterus that brings forth sprouting seeds in order to ensure the unbroken continuation of life. On a cosmic level, spirit and matter together produce all life and energize it. In the middle of the picture is a wheel taken from the famous stone pillar installed by the great Buddhist Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC in Sarnath, India. It was inspired by the wheel of Dharma in the Buddhist tradition. Of course, one may also read into this painting allusions to some contemporary events as well.



Figure 3 – Purusha and Prakriti, Acrylic on Canvas, 55 cm x 45 cm

Human creativity is definitely meant to create light and life out of the darkness of chaotic disorder and nothingness. But as we see in human history, this sublime goal can be distorted or upended by human greed and self-seeking ego. Hence, we need to affirm again and again the supreme calling of every creative artist to conceive of a new paradigm of human living in order to realize the fullness of humanity in love, justice, truth, beauty and goodness for all creation.

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